



# TOWN CENTRE FIRST

50 SOLUTIONS FOR REINVENTED RETAIL  
IN TOMORROW'S TOWN CENTRES

Written and compiled by Glyn Roberts  
Edited by Lisa McMaster

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# WHO IS NIIRTA?

The Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association is the representative business organisation for independent retailers of every kind as well as for wholesalers and suppliers to the sector. Our 1300 members come from every village, town and city across Northern Ireland.

NIIRTA is committed to standing up for our local town and city centres and ensuring our independent retail sector gets a fair deal from Government.

We are members of the Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM) and work closely with local town based Chambers of Commerce and Traders' Associations throughout Northern Ireland. We have also a strategic alliance with the Ulster Chemists' Association.

Along with seven other business organisations, we produced The Jobs Plan manifesto in 2011 and we are amongst the founder members of the Grow NI coalition of business organisations calling for the devolution of the competitive rate of Corporation Tax in Northern Ireland.

**For further information  
contact us:**

**261-263 Ormeau Road  
Belfast  
BT7 3GG**

**T: 028 9022 0004  
E: [info@niirta.com](mailto:info@niirta.com)  
[www.niirta.com](http://www.niirta.com)  
[www.facebook.com/niirta](https://www.facebook.com/niirta)  
[www.twitter.com/niirta](https://www.twitter.com/niirta)**

# FOREWORD



Professor Lester Manley and the team at Manleys: The Branding House have been delighted to work alongside NIIRTA, the appointed agency in the design and development of this visionary document on the reinvention of the retail sector across Northern Ireland's Town and City Centres.

"At heart, Manleys are creators, thinkers, innovators, strategists, advisors, artists and friends. We are serious about the business of branding and marketing communications because never before has branding and marketing strategy been so important. The team at Manleys work harder, think deeper and go the extra mile to produce creative innovation solutions that deliver results for our clients and with over 25 years of industry experience, we've seen a lot and for that reason, Manleys can offer you - A World of Difference."

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# INTRODUCTION

**“HOW WE SHOP  
AS A NATION HAS  
QUITE SIMPLY  
CHANGED BEYOND  
RECOGNITION.  
FOREVER.”**

MARY PORTAS



## **This report is about the future.**

It is about change and the building of modern and inclusive town and city centres which have the right mix of independent, niche and multiple retailers.

It is about turning our town centres into vibrant living communities with a strong café culture and night-time economy.

It is about making them destinations for shoppers and providing the very best in shopping experiences.

Retail is the biggest sector of the Northern Ireland economy and our independent retail sector makes up the largest part of our small business sector.

NIIRTA's vision for our independent retail sector is for modern, forward looking shops which embrace new technology and the very highest standard of customer service. Consumers today will not accept badly laid out shops, inferior customer service or poor choice of product.

Change is the only constant in retail and when retailers refuse to innovate and

reinvent themselves then they risk the future of their business.

Amongst our 50 policy priorities in this report, we include radical proposals for lower taxes, more rate relief and call for further devolution of decision making to local communities and to our new system of local councils.

This report seeks to bring solutions to alleviate the continuing decline in our town and city centres and for a resurgence in independent retailing. We welcome The Portas Review and hope our recommendations can contribute to the debate that this report has created.

Town Centre First builds upon NIIRTA's policy documents, Nightmare on Every Street (2008), Programme for Prosperity (2010) and A Five Point Plan for Fair Rates (2011).

The business community in Northern Ireland needs to be at the cutting edge of new radical ideas and bring solutions to Government, rather than problems.

NIIRTA is very grateful for the support of Manleys in designing this report.

We hope that our ideas and solutions will provoke debate and we look forward to hearing constructive feedback.

**Glyn Roberts**  
**NIIRTA Chief Executive**  
[glyn.roberts@niirta.com](mailto:glyn.roberts@niirta.com)





# THE CHALLENGES FACING NORTHERN IRELAND'S TOWN & CITY CENTRES

"IN THE UK, 12,000 INDEPENDENT SHOPS CLOSED IN 2009 ALONE. THIS IS NOT JUST AN ECONOMIC TRAGEDY BUT ALSO A SOCIAL ONE, AS HIGH STREETS LOSE THEIR INDIVIDUAL DISTINCTIVENESS. FAR TOO MANY HIGH STREETS ARE CHARACTERISED BY EMPTY, BOARDED UP SHOPS SYMBOLISING THE WIDER DECLINE OF OUR ECONOMY. THIS ONLY MAKES IT HARDER FOR THE SHOPS AND BUSINESSES THAT REMAIN."

RT. HON NICK CLEGG MP,  
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER, 2010

- > In 2011 over 1000 small shops closed in Northern Ireland.
- > This trend is likely to double in 2012/13.
- > Northern Ireland has consistently scored highest in the UK in the British Retail Consortium's shop vacancy surveys.
- > Many of our towns have shop vacancy rates of between 30-50%.
- > DOE Retail Planning Service is currently processing around 2 million sq. ft. of out of town superstore retail development.



# 1: PLANNING REFORM

“THE EXECUTIVE SHOULD, AS A MATTER OF URGENCY, REVIEW AND OVERHAUL THE PLANNING SYSTEM TO PUT SPEED AND CLARITY AT ITS HEART. THIS IS ALSO A PERFECT OPPORTUNITY TO REBALANCE THE PLANNING SYSTEM BY INTRODUCING A ‘TOWN CENTRE FIRST’ POLICY THAT ENSURES TOWN CENTRE SITES ARE GIVEN PRIORITY FOR DEVELOPMENT.”

JANE BEVIS,  
DIRECTOR OF THE NI  
RETAIL CONSORTIUM

## The Context

While Planning is certainly not the only problem facing our local town centres, it is certainly at the very top of the list for a radical change of direction. Retail Planning Policy in Northern Ireland is decades out of date and is in desperate need of modernisation.

NIIRTA is in no way anti multiple supermarket and we fully accept the reality that they are an integral part of the retail offer for consumers. What we are opposed to is the continuing number of out of town superstores that are currently being given planning permission and which draw away vital footfall and jobs from our town centres.

The National Retail Planning Forum conducted research into the impact that 96 out of town superstores throughout England and Wales had on local employment. It showed that each superstore opening resulted in an

average net loss in employment of 276 full time jobs within local small business.

Currently there is about 2 million sq. ft. of out of town superstore development threatening the viability of not only Belfast City Centre, but also the town centres of Magherafelt, Derry/Londonderry, Strabane, Banbridge, Newry and many others.

Out of town superstores suck away footfall, jobs and shops from town centres and cut the very heart and vitality out of our towns and cities which in turn threatens our café culture and night-time economy. We want to see these big stores locating in our town centres where they would add to the retail offer and generate footfall.

The current Retail Planning Policy gives little or no protection to our town and city centres and we need to see a new policy which safeguards them.





# NIIRTA RECOMMENDATIONS

- > A five-year moratorium on any further out of town superstore development should be put in place. During this five-year period, a new Town Centre Development Programme should be introduced, ensuring that any new multiple stores are located in town centres.
- > In addition, during that five-year moratorium, an effective Town Centre Retail Planning Policy, which builds upon draft PPS5, should be put in place.
- > Urgent consideration should also be given to the introduction of a cap on the size of Class 1 out of town retail stores based on the scheme already in place in the Republic of Ireland.
- > A fair and appropriate third party right of appeal needs to be established in relation to major retail planning applications to avoid lengthy and expensive judicial reviews.
- > Given its role in regenerating town centres, the Department for Social Development should be granted statutory consultee status on all large out of town retail applications.



## 2: BETTER GOVERNANCE FOR OUR TOWN CENTRES

**“GOVERNMENTS  
MUST SET IN  
PLACE THE  
FRAMEWORK  
TO PROMOTE  
TOWN CENTRE  
INVESTMENT  
AND ACTIVITY.”**

MARTIN BLACKWELL  
CEO ATCM

### The Context

Having three departments (DOE, DSD & DRD) responsible for town centre regeneration and planning makes it difficult to get a joined up approach when having to work with three Ministers, three sets of officials and three different political parties.

In addition, the Department of Finance & Personnel has responsibility for business rates and local councils are also key stakeholders in town centre policy development.

NIIRTA has consistently been a champion for the introduction of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in Northern Ireland, which would give local retailers a greater say in how their town centre is run.





# NIIRTA RECOMMENDATIONS

- > The regeneration, planning and transport functions of DSD, DOE & DRD should be merged into a single Department for Strategic Development and the remaining functions given to other departments.
- > Pending this merger, a Strategic Town Centre Partnership should be established which brings together the three Ministers and key players in retail and town centre management to advise on policy and ensure effective co-ordination.
- > We support wider moves to create a new Department for the Economy and further Department mergers to reduce the number of Government Departments to eight.
- > Intertrade Ireland should establish a North-South Retail Forum consisting of key retail organisations and relevant Ministers to discuss areas of mutual concern, cross border policy and co-ordination.
- > DSD should bring forward its draft legislation for the introduction of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in Northern Ireland and establish an industry working group to oversee their implementation.
- > Local Councils, DSD and the local private sector must be more pro-active in establishing more Town Centre Partnerships to ensure improved decision making in local town centres.



# 3: CREATING THE VERY BEST SHOPPING EXPERIENCE IN OUR TOWN CENTRES

**"I BELIEVE THAT OUR HIGH STREETS ARE UNIQUELY PLACED TO DELIVER SOMETHING NEW. I BELIEVE THAT OUR HIGH STREETS CAN BE LIVELY, DYNAMIC, EXCITING AND SOCIAL PLACES THAT GIVE A SENSE OF BELONGING AND TRUST TO A COMMUNITY."**

MARY PORTAS

## The Context

Our town and city centres must adapt to a rapidly changing consumer market. We need to ensure that the consumer shopping experience is the very best, making shopping fun and not a chore.

The independent retail sector must pride itself with that badge of being different and offering something unique to consumers in terms of price, quality and product choice. That's why we strongly support Independent Week in Belfast -because it celebrates the variety and contribution our independents make to the market place.

Town centres are also not just about retail. If we are to increase footfall, attractive, well laid out town centres with a strong café culture, night-time economy and living communities are essential.

The Arts are key drivers in the regeneration of the night-time economy of towns and cities, with visitors spending a substantial amount in local cafés, shops, restaurants and hotels.





# NIIRTA RECOMMENDATIONS

- > Every Local Council should organise an annual independent retail week in their town centres to promote the sector, encourage greater spending with small shops and to celebrate the contribution independent retailers make to the community and local economy.
- > The Northern Ireland Tourist Board should further develop its marketing of Northern Ireland as a weekend shopping destination and work with retailers and other stakeholders to achieve this.
- > Support further DSD funding of more 'Virtual Window' schemes, based upon the Perry Street project in Dungannon, to paint and tidy up derelict shops.
- > Encourage Local Councils to give support to the ATCM Purple Flag Programme which offers a detailed examination and, if successful, independent accreditation of the way a town manages its night-time economy.
- > New legislation is required to support the growing desire for a café culture in our town and city centres. A legal framework is essential to allow businesses within the hospitality sector to place tables and chairs in designated areas of the public realm for the sale and consumption of food and drink.
- > Support the manifesto of our colleagues, Pubs of Ulster and its Thrive on 5 Campaign to reduce VAT to 5% for the hospitality industry in Northern Ireland.
- > DCAL should increase support for The Arts Infrastructure to enhance the night-time economy for new venues like the MAC, Braid Centre and Grand Opera House.
- > DCAL to continue to support Cultural Tourist Initiatives and events such as Culture Night in Belfast's Cathedral Quarter and bigger projects like Derry/Londonderry City of Culture 2013.
- > A comprehensive Retail Development Strategy to be developed by Local Councils and Executive for Town Centres. This new strategy would audit vacant shops, look at ways to prepare them for new use and engage with prospective retailers to match them for appropriate town centre sites.
- > Support the expansion of the Re-Store programme to revitalise retail in town centres.
- > Welcome the Belfast City Council Investment Programme and urge long term plans to expand the Renewing the Routes programme to improve Belfast's Arterial Routes.
- > The NI Executive and Local Councils should implement the conclusions of the Consumer Focus Post report 'A Front Office for Government Services' which calls for local Post Offices to be given more of their services and develop the network as community information hubs which would increase footfall for local retailers and town centres.
- > Support more efforts to encourage town centre living such as the 'living above the shop' initiative and looking at providing more affordable housing to make our town and city centres real living communities.
- > The NI Executive needs to focus more on the creative potential of planning, urban design and architecture to address dereliction and abandoned spaces in our town and city centres. NIIRTA fully supports the campaign of our colleagues in the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society and Forum for Alternative Belfast to protect the Built Heritage in our towns and cities.
- > DETI to establish a Retail Policy Review to examine ways to grow the sector and look at Invest NI's role in supporting the next generation of retail entrepreneurs.



# 4: RATES AND TAXATION - PROVIDING NEW INCENTIVES FOR TOWN CENTRE INVESTMENT

"I HAVE ALSO LISTENED TO VIEWS EXPRESSED FROM VARIOUS ORGANISATIONS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF EMPTY SHOPS ON CORE SHOPPING AREAS. AS A RESULT A ONE YEAR CONCESSION IS AVAILABLE FROM 1 APRIL, ALLOWING 50% EMPTY PROPERTY RELIEF TO CONTINUE FOR A YEAR ON LONG TERM EMPTY RETAIL PREMISES. THIS WILL APPLY WHERE THE PROPERTY BECOMES OCCUPIED IN 2012/13 AND HAS BEEN EMPTY FOR 12 MONTHS OR MORE. RELIEF WILL THEN BE AWARDED FOR UP TO 12 MONTHS, HELPING TO REVITALISE OUR TOWN CENTRES AND CORE SHOPPING AREAS."

SAMMY WILSON MP MLA,  
MINISTER FOR FINANCE &  
PERSONNEL, 2012

## The Context

The NI Executive has a good track record in Rates Reform, introducing and extending the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme, freezing the Regional Rate and introducing a Rates Holiday for those businesses taking up shops which have been vacant for more than a year. However, while much has been achieved, much more still needs to be done to address the problem of excessive Business Rates.

NIIRTA is one of the founder members of the Grow NI coalition of business groups calling for the devolution of Corporation Tax and a competitive rate for Northern Ireland. More Foreign Direct Investment, as a result of a reduced Corporation Tax,

will create more jobs, bigger salaries and more spending in local shops and town centres.

Northern Ireland must also look at how it can adapt the Enterprise Zone model from the rest of the UK to enhance regeneration efforts in our town and city centres.





# NIIRTA RECOMMENDATIONS

- > The Executive should bring forward proposals for a third extension of the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme to a NAV of £15,000 by 2016 and provide models of how to fund it.
- > The Rates Revaluation should be brought forward to 2013.
- > Building upon the existing first year Rates Holiday of 50% for businesses taking up vacant shops, an emergency 100% first year relief should be considered for town centres or those which have a 40% or more shop vacancy rate, to support regeneration efforts.
- > In order to support new start retailers, DFP should provide 50% rate relief for those opening short term pop up shops.
- > The Executive should also work with Local Councils to establish Small Retailer Incubation Units for new start traders in town centres and examine ways to provide supportive and appropriate rate relief to develop this initiative.
- > NIIRTA fully supports the Grow NI campaign for Corporation Tax devolution and has signed the Pledge for Prosperity along with all other local business organisations. The NI Executive and HM Treasury should publish a road map of CT devolution and rolling rate reduction over an agreed time frame.
- > In order to provide wider support to the retail sector in Northern Ireland and stimulate consumer demand, the UK Government should reduce VAT by 5%.
- > Small traders should be given a one year National Insurance Holiday if they employ school leavers.
- > The NI Executive should grant the top ten town & city centres with the highest shop vacancy rates with Enterprise Zone status. These zones would include a relaxation of planning regulations to enable faster decisions, rates holidays and other capital allowances to incentivise new retail and business developments in town centres. These zones would be sensitive to any existing conservation areas and fully respect the build heritage.
- > In order to better support local companies being able to tender for Town Centre Schemes and Urban Regeneration Projects, DSD must review its policy in this area.



# 5: GETTING CAR PARKING & PUBLIC TRANSPORT RIGHT

**“I WANT TO  
MAKE PUBLIC  
TRANSPORT  
PEOPLE’S FIRST  
CHOICE, NOT  
LAST RESORT.”**

CONOR MURPHY MP MLA,  
DRD MINISTER 2007-2011

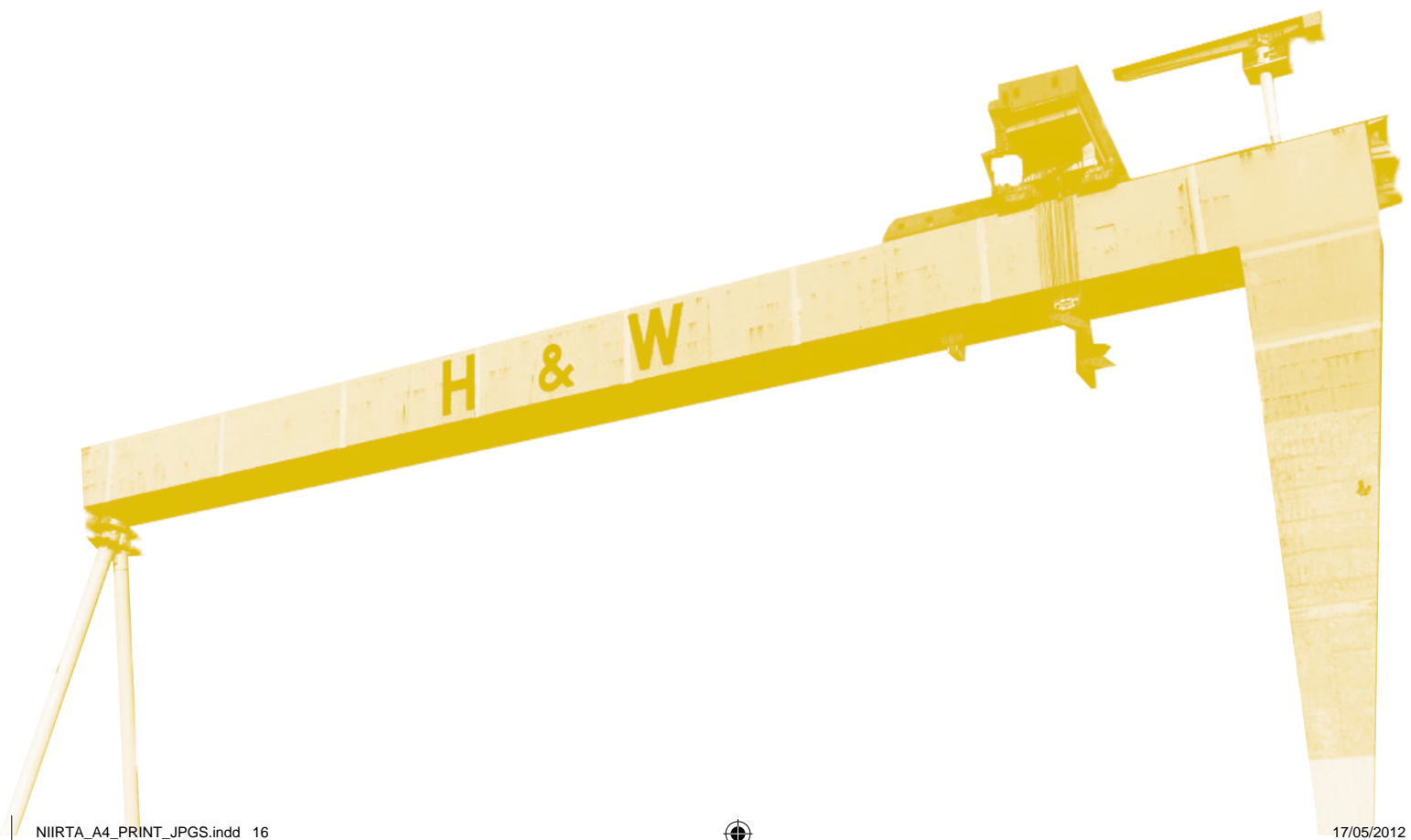
## The Context

Having an affordable, accessible and effective public transport system is essential for the future regeneration of our town centres and the growth of our retail sector. A modern public transport structure should maximise efficiency and be responsive to customer needs, in both urban and rural contexts.

We need to see more action to provide affordable town centre car parking, fair and common sense parking enforcement and an end to the ‘over zealous’ approach by the ‘redcoats’ which is acting as a deterrent to many shoppers parking in our town centres.

In recent years we have seen some very welcome progress by DRD Minister Danny Kennedy in dropping proposed ‘on street car parking charges’.

However much more needs to be done to get car parking right for our town centres so that they are user friendly for shoppers and their cars and have an effective and fair enforcement regime in place to ensure a turnover of cars.





# NIIRTA RECOMMENDATIONS

- > A new comprehensive Car Parking Strategy is put in place which provides for affordable and accessible car parking and ensures a new joined up approach across all of our town and city centres.
- > DRD devolve powers to the new eleven Local Councils to give them a greater role in car parking schemes in their areas.
- > A ten year freeze on car parking charges and no further additional parking charges in town centres.
- > The first one to two hour free on street car parking in local towns should not under any circumstances be removed.
- > DRD should examine ways in which to introduce new charges on out of town superstore car parks to ensure parity with town centre charging.
- > The ten minutes 'grace' period when a parking ticket runs out should be strictly adhered to by parking enforcers.
- > A fuller and more transparent car parking fine appeal process should be established.
- > DRD should look at the introduction of a 'timed disc' system for delivery and service vehicles.
- > Translink should give priority to more bus lanes, well designed bus stops with sufficient shelters, good travel information and efficient services that run on time.
- > DRD and DARD should introduce more rural transport schemes, building upon the Dial-a-Lift service and Assisted Rural Transport scheme to support rural dwellers, the disabled and older people.
- > Implementation of the DRD Accessible Transport action plan.
- > More strategic Park and Ride sites to be established to reduce the number of car users coming into town and city centres.
- > NIIRTA welcomes recent investment in the roads infrastructure in areas in need of considerable improvement such as Strabane, Derry/Londonderry, Omagh and Larne who all depend on the road network for shoppers and tourists alike. Continued investment in road infrastructure is vital for our retail sector.
- > Translink's monopoly on public transport should be ended and the private sector given a greater role in providing efficient transport. Privatisation of Translink should not be ruled out as a long term option.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Glyn Roberts was appointed Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association in January 2008 after serving seven years as Head of Press and Parliamentary Affairs with the Federation of Small Businesses in Northern Ireland.

Glyn is currently Vice-Chairman of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Business Trust, a member of the Institute of Directors' Economic Strategy Committee, a council member of Chest Heart & Stroke, board member of Oxfam Ireland and a former Chairman of the Northern Ireland Government Affairs Group.

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261-263 Ormeau Road  
Belfast BT7 3GG

T: 028 9022 0004  
E: [info@niirta.com](mailto:info@niirta.com)

[www.facebook.com/niirta](http://www.facebook.com/niirta)  
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